

Raid Leaves A Trail of Mysteries

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While a fog of unanswered questions still obscures the plan to rescue the American hostage in Tehran, some clues to the nature of the raid have been found by Iranians searching the charred, bullet-riddled wreckage of the helicopters at the desert refueling site.

Reports from Tehran say they include money — both Iranian and U.S. currency — a large number of rifles and grenades and a number of small Iranian flags.

Just how all this would have been used in the next phase of the aborted mission is a matter of steadfast silence at the White House and at the Pentagon, but there are reports that the raid would have been aided by a "second force," made up of U.S. intelligence operatives and soldiers, some of whom had been quietly infiltrated into Iran several weeks before the ill-fated raid.

Pentagon spokesman Tom Ross said he could neither confirm nor deny a report in The New York Times quoting unnamed officials as saying that the second force would have provided trucks and cars to bring the 90-man commando team to the embassy in Tehran from a mountaintop hideout.

The Times report stated that the two teams would have then cut off power into the embassy and "neutralized" its sizable guard force. The hostages, the commandos and the second force operatives would have been taken by helicopter out of Tehran to an abandoned airstrip in western Iran where the C-130s would be waiting to take them out of the country.

At a briefing yesterday, the Pentagon refused to comment on any aspect of the second phase of the mission, except to say that, with the exception of the eight dead, all men inserted in the first phase of the mission had been taken out when the mission aborted.

While the Iranians puzzle over the meaning of the wreckage in the desert, two other inquiries into the mystery-shrouded raid have begun. Both could have serious consequences for the policy-makers who approved the raid and some of the

men who carried it out.

Among political leaders in both parties on Capitol Hill there is widespread questioning of the strategy of the mission as it becomes known, particularly over the reliance on eight helicopters and just 90 men in the assault team.

Intelligence officials from several foreign governments, including the Israeli government, have also been privately critical of the size of the 90-man assault team. To carry out the much easier raid on Uganda's Entebbe Airport in 1976, the Israelis used three U.S. C-130s and a force of 158 men. And a backup force of 150 men was held within an hour's flying time of the airport.

A military official appearing at the Pentagon briefing defended the strategy, saying that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were certain that the 90 men would be sufficient. He explained that additional helicopters would have required additional C-130s to carry in fuel, ammunition and other support equipment. At some point, he said, a decision had to be made between keeping the force small enough to evade detection and large enough to survive. The consensus was that eight helicopters were enough to minimize the risk.

In order to defend themselves

against accusations from the Hill and elsewhere, the Pentagon and the Carter administration have started their own investigations of the incident, investigations that are beginning with what one source described as "meticulous" debriefings of the men involved.

Of particular interest are the air crews and maintenance men who worked on the eight RH-53D "Sea Stallion" helicopters. The military official told reporters that the helicopters, normally used for mine-clearing operations, had been specially reconfigured for the mission. Mine-clearing gear was removed and extra fuel tanks were inserted to give the choppers a 500-mile range.

He said that the modifications had not harmed the mechanics of the aircraft. The helicopters were brought to the Nimitz by ship and reassembled on the carrier's deck.

An unspecified cover story had led all but one or two officers aboard the Nimitz, he said, to believe that the helicopters were to be used for some other purpose than to take out the hostages.

The failure of three of the helicopters and the crash of a fourth, the official said, could not be explained. Such a rate of failure was far beyond anything the Navy had experienced with the aircraft since they were introduced in 1972.

The helicopters are made by the Sikorsky Corp. Their engines are made by General Electric.

The Carter administration is already under heavy criticism for failing to stem the flow of skilled pilots, air crewmen and maintenance crews from the armed forces. The aborted raid on Tehran will provide a heavy argument for supporters of military pay increases on Capitol Hill.

The debacle will also provide food for thought for members of the armed services committees on Capitol Hill, which traditionally cut operation and maintenance funds and training funds in favor of buying new weaponry and new technology for the services.